

# Tragedy of the Forests

## Tree-Love: Maori and Pakeha Versions

By "AOTEAROA"

A LITTLE over half a century ago the forested north-east shoulder of the North Island of New Zealand was unroaded. From Waikaremoana to the East Cape the Huiarau range stood remote in its forested grandeur; the Urewera was a primitive, almost primeval, tract; the sacred mountain, Maungapohatu, was unvisited by whites, feared by Maoris. From the Huiarau highlands rivers—then all surrounded with waterflow-regulating bush—ran down to the Bay of Plenty on one side, and to Poverty Bay and the East Coast bays on the other. Between Gisborne and Opotiki, via the coast, many (perhaps most) of the rivers were unbridged. Early in the century the writer had to hire a Maori guide, with two Maori ponies, in order to ride from Te Whaiti (on the Whirinaki tributary of the Rangitaiki) to Waikaremoana by Maori tracks. The travelling time taken over this portion of the Huiarau was two days, with a night camp on top of the range. Maori life then was almost unspoiled. Pigeons, kakas and tuis were abundant.

### ELSDON BEST'S UREWERA

From the Whirinaki watershed the track passed to the upper Whakatane and then on to the streams running to Lake Waikare, where the Government accommodation house had not long been built. Elsdon Best had just published his excellent story-guides to Waikaremoana. The tourist traffic would follow the promised road, and hydro-electric power would come in its turn, even then envisaged by engineers.

A few years later, but well within the first decade of this century, the same trip was made on foot; but reversely, that is to say, from Waikaremoana to Te Whaiti, Murupara (then generally known as Galatea), Waiotapu and Rotorua. From Murupara to Waiotapu the unmetalled pumice road passed across the Kaingaroa Plains, then almost treeless, but today carrying one of the most closely packed exotic (man-planted) forests in the world.

Over the Maori tracks between the open Rangitaiki-Whirinaki country and the Waikaremoana-East Coast open country, a guerilla warfare was carried on in the 'sixties and 'seventies between Te Kooti's Maoris on the one

side, and on the other side white forces aided by the Arawa native allies under Captain Gilbert Mair, whose memorial is in the Ohinemutu churchyard (see "Camp-fire at Te Tapiri," in the late James Cowan's "Tales of the Maori Bush").

### SOME OF THE BIRDS

No bird attracted more attention in the Urewera in those days than the North Island kaka. A detailed description of the colours and shades of colour of any bird as wonderful as the kaka belong to a text-book, not to a story of bird-beauty. Kaka colours are indescribable, but the greatest moment of all was when the bird took flight, and the colours suddenly revealed by the upraised wing flashed through the green forest trees. That was a great moment, quite distinct from what one felt as he watched the bird step parrot-like along a branch digging into the wood with its incisive bill. For a while kakas were snared or otherwise killed in the Urewera forest by the thousand, by Maoris, including Rua's Maoris. Their one-time plenitude made the arts of Maori fowling profitable.

From crown to tail the native pigeon represented a great length of bird—the tail far below a branch, and the head far above, and in between the wonderful white shirt-front of kereru. Yet if the bird sat quiet you could stare into the tree and not see it. Seven in a tree was nothing unusual.

The kaka and the pigeon and the well-known tui (has his song deteriorated in modern times?) all let you observe them, and in those days were certain to attend your walks; but, then and now, to clearly observe the long-tailed cuckoo, koekoeka, was a most difficult thing. This fair-sized visitor's call was sometimes heard. The writer has yet to hear anyone describe that call faithfully, and he will not attempt to represent it in words, believing that to be impossible. But it is one of the most elusive, mystical calls of the bush, for the bird seems to be a ventriloquist, and the call apparently comes from anywhere and everywhere. Only once was the long-tailed cuckoo clearly seen. The other cuckoo, pipiwarauroa,